

Vietnam vet decorated after 35 years

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By BRENDAN McKENNA Herald Staff

Edward Stevens Jr. of Shrewsbury stood proudly at attention in his slightly faded combat fatigues Thursday as a Vermont National Guard colonel pinned medals to his chest.

His beard and the small golden stud in his left ear weren't quite regulation, but Stevens, 56, hasn't been in the service since the 1980s.

The medals, a Purple Heart with oak leaf clusters, a Bronze Star and a combat infantryman's badge, were of even older vintage.

Stevens earned the honors during his service in Vietnam, from 1968 to 1970 with the 5th Special Forces Group and the 1st Infantry Division, but it wasn't until recently that the awards caught up to him.

He received the Bronze Star for valor and one of his Purple Hearts for wounds received in action when he and other members of the 1st Infantry Division were on ambush patrol in the Iron Triangle region of Vietnam. When his patrol was ambushed, Stevens said he saved five of his comrades by dragging them out of the line of fire into a foxhole. He said he was shot in the leg during that firefight.

The medals were formally presented Thursday by Col. Peter Fagan at the Rutland office of Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., whose staff helped Stevens track down the awards. Jeffords looked on, grinning at the presentation.

"Thanks, Jim," Stevens said in a choked voice interrupted by sniffles, his eyes watering as he shook the senator's hand. "Without you, this never would have happened."

The ceremony was a proud moment for Stevens, whose father, a World War II veteran, and son from Rhode Island accompanied him for the ceremony.

"This is the closest to a homecoming I've ever had. I just wish the 60,000 on the wall in Washington and the others could have a homecoming as well," he said.

Asked why it took so long for his medals to reach him, Stevens' response was colored by some bitterness at his experience on returning from Vietnam.

"Vietnam was a war that, if you want to talk about people in Washington, it's the one that everybody wants to forget," he said. "And they're the only ones who could forget it, the people in Washington."

To Jeffords, who is about to retire, Stevens said, "I'm glad you're out of there. A man with integrity doesn't belong in the White House or anywhere near it."

Jeffords said that he felt it was very important to do "anything we can do to be sure all of these errors of omission will be corrected."

"There's still a lot out there," he said.

Diana Harrington, who handles veterans issues for Jeffords, agreed that many military veterans are entitled to awards they haven't received.

"It's not unusual," she said.

She said the military generally doesn't track down soldiers who have won medals, but have not received them because their deployment ended.

"We get a lot of calls from people trying to get a copy of their service records, a necessary step to get VA benefits," she said. "That's where we started here, then we discovered all these medals that had been earned but never received."

Harrington said the ceremony was less about those actions than it was about allowing Stevens to close the book on his Vietnam experiences.

She said, "One reason we really wanted Ed to do this was because so many veterans out there, seeing new veterans come home, still haven't put their own service to bed."

Stevens' feeling that the ceremony and receipt of his medals is a long-overdue welcome home is a common response, Harrington said, and it gives them a sense of closure.

"It really is," she said.